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ABSTRACT

Spanish usage by a large segment of the United States' population has created concern that English language and middle class culture are being displaced. Research in the 1970s found, generally, that Spanish-speaking people were indeed undergoing linguistic and cultural assimilation. However, widespread use of Spanish by the government in education and social welfare programs is feared to have reversed earlier assimilation. Austin (Texas) neighborhoods visited in one 1971 study were revisited in 1982. Three factors with potential for affecting assimilation (mobility, family size, and income) were investigated. Comparison of the Mexican American community in Austin in 1971 and 1982, during which there was dramatic change in Spanish usage by government agencies, found little change in Spanish usage with coworkers, in commercial or professional activities, or with friends and neighbors. Increased public use of Spanish has created cultural and linguistic paradoxes and has resulted in a new interaction of the two languages for intimate and formal speech, but has not reversed earlier patterns of assimilation. (MSE)

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Does the public use of Spanish reverse linguistic assimilation?

A second look at Austin, Texas

Paper presented at the Eigth Annual USF Linguistics Club
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Roger M. Thompson

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The core of American culture lies in its English speaking middle class. Access to this class is determined by education and occupation, both of which are based on the use of English. Because of the lure of the middle class, the descendants of immigrants to the United States generally have switched to English within three generations. Is this middle class culture now threatened because another language, in particular Spanish, is allowed to be used in schools, in government agencies, and in business? Many Americans feel so. There is a growing backlash as newspapers report millions of Mexicans entering the United States illegally each year and as the government grants permission for new waves of Cuban refugees to enter the country. The 1980 census found more than 14,600,000 people of Spanish language descent in the United States already. Many feel that if the use of Spanish is not discouraged, the cultural solidarity of the United States will be replaced by the schisms of Canada, Belgium, and India.

But does the use of a language by a large segment of the population mean that English is being displaced? In the case of Spanish, researchers in the 1970's found just the opposite to be true. For example, various studies of the language loyalty of Mexican Americans pointed out that Mexican Americans in the urban setting are switching to English (Penalosa 1980). Thompson (1971,1974) found that in a traditional Mexican American neighborhood in Austin, Texas, the choice of language was the function of generation in the city, with the up-coming generation preferring English. Similar results were found in other urban settings such as Albuquerque, New Mexico (Hudson-Edwards and Bills 1982) and Los Angeles, California (Lopez, 1978).

This same pattern of linguistic assimilation was found with the Spanish surnamed residents of the United States in general. In their analysis of the 1970 US census data, Jaffe, Cullen, and Boswell (1980.72) found that two thirds of the Spanish surnamed residents of the United States had switched to English. The speed with which they switched to English depended on the demographic factors of education, neighborhood, and occupation. For example, as Mexican Americans increased their education, they became employed in middle class occupations, moved to middle class neighborhoods, and switched to English.

When these studies were conducted in the 1970's, the government was just beginning to use Spanish in education and social welfare programs. Has this legal recognition and support for the use of Spanish reversed this assimilation? In order to find out, the families which formed the basis for the Thompson (1971) study in Austin, Texas were revisited in 1982. In the following pages we will first look at the socio-economic factors that might influence linguistic assimilation in this neighborhood and review the results of the original 1971 study. Then we will examine the effects of a decade of publically sanctioned Spanish. Finally, we will look at the linguistic ramifications and give suggestions for further research.

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The Mexican American population of Austin, Texas. The demographic factors of mobility, family size, and income have been found to correlate with the linguistic assimilation of Spanish speakers. For example, in stable neighborhoods there are continuing relationships both in and outside the extended family. Language preferences are known and are reinforced through social interaction. As for family size, Jaffe, Cullen, and Boswell (1980.63) found that life in high fertility neighborhoods deters linguistic assimilation, perhaps because having large families indicates a preference for a traditional Hispanic way of life. Finally, low income influences assimilation since residents with low paying jobs are more likely to be interacting with new Spanish speaking immigrants while higher paying occupations are in the English speaking middle class.

At first glance, the Mexican Americans in Austin resemble the general population of the city in mobility. As the capital of Texas, the location of the state's largest university, and the site of an air force base, Austin is a very transient city which attracts people from many places. The city is rapidly growing with a population of 345,000 (1980) and with an even more rapidly growing Spanish origin population of almost 65,000. Ninety percent of this Hispanic population is of Mexican descent, rather than Cuban, Puerto Rican, or other Spanish. Fewer than ten percent are foreign born. As with the general population, only one third of the Mexican Americans have lived in the same residence for more than 5 years. However, in both cases, 45 percent own their own homes.

On the other hand, when Mexican Americans move, they are more likely to move within the city. Only one quarter of the Mexican Americans did not live in Austin five years previously whereas one third of the general population did not. Does this mean that Mexican Americans are more likely to have family members living closeby and have continuing friendships that reinforce Spanish?

Another difference is family size. Although nearly 20 percent of the population in 1980 were Mexican Americans, only 12 percent of the households were. In other words, there were more children in Mexican American homes. Nearly 30 percent of the children in public school in 1981 were of Spanish origin according to the Austin Independent School District. According to the census, the average fertility rate for women in Austin was 2.5. Half of the neighborhoods with a rate above 3.0 were predominantly Mexican American and half of the Mexican American population lives in these high fertility neighborhoods. Will the use of Spanish by schools and other government agencies serving these neighborhoods strengthen the use of Spanish in succeeding generations?

The third difference that might affect assimilation is income. Nearly 20 percent of the Mexican American households were classified by the 1980 census as below the poverty level. This was twice the rate for the general population. This reflects the high percentage who have low income employment, which probably gives them continuing contact with new immigrants and others with low ability in English who are working as unskilled laborers. If social welfare services are offered in Spanish, will this discourage the learning of English? And what about the nearly half of the employed Mexican Americans over the age of sixteen who are in English speaking middle class occupations? What if these occupations start allowing Spanish to be used as a part of affirmative action programs?

The neighborhood. The Mexican American population in Austin is located throughout the city although there are certain sections where they form the bulk of the population. For at least the last thirty years, the traditional section with the largest concentration has been located east of the downtown bordered on the south by the Colorado River and on the north by a predominantly black section. Although most Mexican Americans once were located in this neighborhood, now only 16 percent are. This is the area that formed the basis for this study.

This section of town has the appearance of a Spanish speaking neighborhood. Over 88 percent of the population is of Spanish language ancestry. Mexican American music can be heard through the windows of the homes. There are Spanish language billboards, businesses, and churches (including more than twenty protestant). The schools with the largest bilingual programs are located here. Because the city provides various services such as playgrounds, ball parks, employment centers, and a branch library, younger people can remain in the neighborhood interacting with other Spanish speakers.

Although owner occupancy is the same as for the city at 46 percent, the neighborhood is more stable than the city in general. Nearly two thirds rather than one third lived in the same house five years before the census. Three quarters of these units were bought before 1970. For the city in general most owner-occupied homes were built after 1970. Even the renters were more stable. City wide, two thirds of the renters moved into their unit within one year of the census. For this neighborhood only one third of the renters had. In fact nearly 20 percent rented the same location ten years earlier as compared to 5 percent citywide.

The census found the population was largely Texas born, 84 percent in fact. Thirteen percent of the Spanish origin residents were foreign born, slightly higher than the city wide average. The area is slowly losing population as younger families move to other parts of town. However, it can not be said that this is a neighborhood of old people. Over half the population is under the age of twenty-five. As is traditional among Mexican Americans, the older people live with an extended family.

The poverty level is higher than that for the Spanish origin population in the rest of the city. For example, the northern half of the neighborhood has a poverty level of twice that of Mexican Americans in general. The educational level of adults is also lower than the city wide average. Only 25 percent have finished high school as compared to 75 percent of the general population. This lower level of education is reflected in the occupational rankings. Only 26 percent are middle class.

It is because of these characteristics that this neighborhood should be of interest in determining whether the use of Spanish by government agencies deters the linguistic assimilation of an ethnic group. It is a stable, high fertility neighborhood. There is a large percentage of foreign born residents who could reinforce Spanish. Spanish language media are widely available. The education and occupation levels are low. There is a high degree of poverty indicating that wage earners probably work in unskilled occupations in a Spanish speaking environment, as is common in Texas. In short, if bilingual education and other governmental uses of Spanish will promote or protect the use of the language, it should be here in this neighborhood where the demographic factors favor its maintenance.

The 1971 study. The neighborhood was originally studied in 1971 when there was little use of Spanish by government agencies. A ten percent random sampling of families was selected to be interviewed concerning their use of Spanish. In order to control variables, only the usage in the homes of 136 male household heads was examined. It appeared at first that Spanish was the preferred language when speaking with parents, with children, and with friends and neighbors. However, when the variable of childhood residence was controlled, another picture appeared. Those who were raised in an urban setting used Spanish with their parents but English or half Spanish with their children. They tended to use half Spanish with friends and neighbors. Those raised in the city never wrote or read Spanish. The higher the educational or occupational level, the less Spanish they used. In all cases, however, Spanish radio was a favorite.

Those who had been raised in the urban setting were interviewed a second time to find out more about the use of English within the home and to determine the attitudes of parents towards language maintenance. In the fifty homes that were visited it was found that the occupational mobility of the father had no effect on the use of Spanish by the children. In all cases English was the preferred language. The only effect was in the use of Spanish with the wife. Those who were upwardly mobile tended to use half Spanish or less. Those who were not upwardly mobile used only Spanish. This reflected the use of language at work. The upwardly mobile tended to work in an English speaking environment. The others were surrounded by other Spanish speakers at the workplace. In fact, the fathers were adopting different dialects of English depending on their occupational aspirations (Thompson 1975).

In general then, the adults who had been raised in the city spoke Spanish to those who were older than themselves, half Spanish to those in their own age group, and mostly English to those who were younger. In fact, two thirds of the families never spoke Spanish to their children. Three quarters of the fathers did not feel that Spanish was necessary for ethnic identity. Most wanted their children to learn Spanish but did not feel it was necessary for them to learn it at home. Fewer than twenty percent of the children spoke only Spanish at home. The parents did not feel that the children were rejecting Spanish. They simply felt that the children would pick up whatever Spanish they needed from their friends.

This preference for English was verified when the children's activities were traced outside the home. The children participating in sports at the recreation centers were all speaking English. The teachers in the neighborhood schools reported that few children had a problem with English, those that did had just moved in from rural areas or from Mexico. The churches reported that activities for younger people had to be conducted in English. The library reported that not more than five books a day were checked out in Spanish, and the average for children was only two.

The 1982 restudy. During the following decade there was a dramatic change in the use of Spanish by government agencies, whether law enforcement, social welfare, or education. In 1971 interpreters might be provided for clients who spoke only Spanish, but in general the agencies provided their services in English. By 1982 these same agencies were being required to hire people to work with the public in Spanish. For example, according to Texas law, any school with more than twenty students in a grade who had limited proficiency in

English had to have bilingual education. At the same time Spanish was being encouraged in other ways. More Spanish radio and television was available. The city library was encouraging the reading of Spanish. Some businesses were hiring people to work with the Spanish speaking public. To find out whether this public use of Spanish was reversing the assimilation of this neighborhood, the families that participated in the original study were revisited in the spring of 1982.

The families were traced through the telephone directory. As would be expected in a transient city, nearly half had moved from Austin. However, of those who had been raised in Austin, only one third had moved away. The 44 who remained were interviewed again. Sixty percent of those who had moved to Austin as adults had moved away. Of the 49 who still lived in Austin, 20 were eliminated because they were older than 70 and therefore could not report on the use of Spanish at work. Of the 29 remaining, 13 were available for interviews. As in the original study, the results presented here focus on those of the first group, those who were raised in Austin.

Results. There has been little change in the use of Spanish with coworkers or in commercial or professional activities. With Mexican American coworkers, Spanish is frequently used unless the business has a policy against using Spanish. With Mexican American customers both English and Spanish are used, depending on the relationship with the people involved. English is the expected language unless the speakers know each other. In that case a few words of Spanish may be exchanged. For example, if the receptionist or the nurse at the office is Mexican American, small talk will be in Spanish. Lawyers and doctors use a few words of Spanish at the beginning of a consultation to build rapport. The business transactions themselves are in English. At a grocery store, the customer may use some Spanish with the personnel if they know each other. Otherwise, English is used. Everyone reported that they are cautious in using Spanish with younger personnel because these people have limited ability in Spanish. When they eat out, they prefer Mexican restaurants. Here the tendency is to use Spanish with the waiters since they usually are from Mexico and know little English. When speaking to unfamiliar Mexican Americans, the rule of thumb is to try Spanish if the other person is over thirty five. Otherwise, start with English unless it is obvious that the other person is from Mexico. This was the same pattern ten years ago.

In their contact with friends and neighbors, the use of Spanish is also unchanged. About 80 percent still use half Spanish or more with their friends when they see them on the street or entertain them at home. The amount depends on the preference of the friend. Nearly 60 percent have Mexican American friends who use only English. However, the use of Spanish with neighbors and friends probably has little influence on these adults. They are family oriented and tend to have infrequent social contact with Mexican Americans outside the family circle. They also report that they have limited social contact with immigrants from Mexico, indicating that immigrants play a small role in reinforcing Spanish.

The paradoxes. The increase in Spanish media and bilingual education, and the increased use of Spanish in middle class occupations has had paradoxical results. Nearly everyone now has cable television and over

half now watch Spanish language programs periodically. Now that there is local Spanish radio programming, Spanish radio is even more popular than before. Over 75 percent of the homes reported that they listened almost daily to Spanish language radio. The paradox is that as the Spanish media penetrates the home, the residents report that they use more English than ever before. In 1971 half of the families reported they used half English half Spanish with their children. Now sixty percent use ONLY English. Half reported that they used mostly English with their children before they were old enough for school. Grandparents generally report that they use only English with their grandchildren.

In 1971 only 60 percent of the children reported that they use only English with each other. Now nearly 100 percent do. They report that although they use English with their brothers and sisters at home, they use some Spanish with their friends, as a sign of friendship. However, most conversations are strictly in English. As in 1971, the casual visitor to the neighborhood hears the children speaking only English in the stores, in the streets, and on the ball fields. Even children selling things from door to door speak in English to their prospective customers. In essence, the Spanish heard in the home most likely comes from the media, rather than the residents as Mexican American music replaces fluency in Spanish as a symbol of ethnic identity.

The second paradox lies in the use of bilingual education. Even though the families report that the children have switched to English, the schools are promoting Spanish through bilingual education. When the schools were visited in 1971, the teachers reported that very few children had problems with English. Now that money is available for bilingual education, 20 percent of Hispanic students city wide are in bilingual education or English as a second language programs. In this neighborhood 30 percent are, and in one school over 50 percent are. This does not indicate the true language ability of the students. The 1980 census notes that only 13 percent of the Hispanic students in the city have limited ability in English. In fact in the area around the school with over 50 percent in bilingual programs, the census found only 8 percent of the children had limited proficiency in English. This may be why the United States government has requested that the Austin Independent School District return a certain percentage of the funds granted for the bilingual education of children with limited English proficiency.

The enrollment discrepancies reflect not language ability, but the encouragement of parents who want their children to read and write Spanish before they continue their studies in English. Yes, bilingual education has increased the Spanish language skills of the children to include reading, writing and sometimes speaking. Several grandparents reported that they had started to use more Spanish with their grandchildren while they were in the bilingual program so they would do better in their studies. The public library reported that Spanish books are now very popular with the children. The supermarkets now carry magazines and comic books in Spanish. However, the teaching of Spanish language skills through bilingual education has not reversed the linguistic assimilation of Mexican American children. They are speaking more English than before.

The third paradox concerns the use of Spanish in middle class occupations. One quarter of the respondents report that they use more Spanish today because of pressure from work. Those who have middle class occupations report that they are expected to speak Spanish at work when dealing with the public. Often

they were hired because they are Mexican American and the business needed them because of affirmative action programs or because the business or agency wanted to project a Spanish image for the customers. Paradoxically, the Mexican Americans who have the educational qualifications to fill the positions are the ones who know and use the least Spanish. As a result, some families report that they are having to start using Spanish at home because a son or daughter has been hired to speak Spanish in a bilingual program, in a store, at a police station, or in some other government agency. Thus knowledge of Spanish is becoming a means to advance in a career. Several noted that now even non-Mexican Americans use Spanish in public or at work and the Mexican Americans feel some regret that blue-eyed Anglos, as they put it, often know more Spanish than they do.

However, even this use of Spanish to get ahead is one of incomplete Spanish. Just enough phrases are learned to do what is needed. In the same way, children report that they use more Spanish outside the home now than they used to because of their friends at school. But they learn only some key phrases so they can be friendly. In essence, Spanish has become a social or, better said, a sociable dialect of English, useful for chitchat. Old and young alike report that even though they may prefer and feel more comfortable in English, Spanish phrases are preferred in matters of love and affection and in building rapport.

Some linguistic implications. Those who fear that the increased public use of Spanish will reverse the assimilation of Mexican Americans are looking at assimilation in the United States from the wrong perspective. They misperceive the structure of American society, perhaps because of limited exposure to only the public sphere of American culture and their own personal sphere. As such, they feel that this culture is monolithic. However, Gordon (1964, 1978) and Greeley (1974) point out that the essence of American culture is multicultural, especially in the private spheres. Rather than one melting pot for immigrant groups, there are several smaller pots based on such factors as religion, ethnic background, race, and region. Thus language is just one aspect of the multidimensional processes of assimilation and acculturation, involving the loss of old cultural traits and the acceptance or creation of new traits. Perhaps the most important aspect is a type of creolization where new linguistic and cultural norms are created. The results are what Gordon terms American eth-classes. In the case of the Mexican Americans, this eth-class is not Mexican but is a new American entity with a new set of attitudes and rules for behavior, including rules for the use of language (Keefe and Padilla 1987, Murguia 1975).

The two studies in Austin, Texas, indicate that such an eth-class is being created by Mexican Americans independently of the use of Spanish by government agencies. English is the language of this new class with a restricted form of Spanish playing an important social function. This Spanish is not necessarily learned at home, but rather in the community while interacting with other members of the eth-class. Elias-Olivares (1982) found when she studied the same neighborhood soon after the 1971 study that four types of Spanish were being used in the neighborhood. She noted, however, that focusing on the types of English or Spanish being used presented a misleading picture of language in the neighborhood since the residents were reluctant

to speak only English or Spanish with each other. Language switching was preferred. Even new immigrants adopted the switching norm as soon as they knew some English.

The 1982 study found that even with pressure from employment, the schools, and the media, the residents were reluctant to speak only in Spanish. However, they were just as reluctant to speak only English with fellow Mexican Americans, still preferring language switching. Thus the call of Metcalf (1979) and Ornstein-Galicia (1984) to look at Chicano English or even the search for stable bilingualism is in some ways misdirected if it focuses on the use of separate languages. Instead, researchers should look at this new linguistic creation where a restricted form of Spanish functions much as a social dialect of English. As Sanchez (1983) notes, research should focus on social semantics and on the functions of English and Spanish in speech acts rather than on linguistic forms. In short, the use of Spanish by businesses and public agencies is not causing English to be replaced. Instead, English is interacting with Spanish in a new linguistic creation for intimate and informal speech.

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